

Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries

Records Management Services

Guide to E-mail Storage Options

E-mail is a fast, efficient and cost-effective means for communicating and sharing information. However, e-mail software is not designed for record storage and retention.

E-mail messages are subject to the same record retention laws as other government records. Some government agencies allow their employees to use their e-mail software to store and retrieve e-mail messages, other government agencies do not. This decision is made jointly by management and information technology staff, and they are responsible for communicating storage options to employees. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each storage option. Regardless of where the e-mail message is stored, it needs to be maintained in an organized manner to facilitate access and retrieval of the record.

Option/ Function	Shared Access	Centralized Storage	Record Declaration	Maintains Contextual Metadata	Electronic Backup	Electronic Storage	Automated Record Retention
E-mail System		X		X	X	X	
E-mail Archive				X	X	X	
Save As...	X	X	X		X	X	
Paper Printout	X	X	X				
Records Management Application	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

E-MAIL SYSTEM

Government agencies may permit employees to retain e-mail messages within the “live” e-mail system. Employees are responsible for selecting the messages that will be retained and will be deleted. Employees are encouraged to create topical folders within the system to facilitate organization and retrieval of messages.

PROS

- Messages are stored on servers that are backed up on a regular basis. The backup is for disaster recovery purposes, and should not be used for search and retrieval.
- Messages can be organized in folders within the e-mail account. Drag and drop filing is quick and easy.
- It is easy to search for, forward and reply to messages.
- Messages remain linked to their attachment(s) and transactional metadata.

CONS

- It's too easy for users to save every message, without considering whether it is an official record and whether it should be saved.
- As the number of messages stored on the server grows, it will cause space and performance problems for the e-mail system.
- Messages will only be accessible by the account owner, or those with proxy access.
- Messages will not be stored with other paper and electronic records that document the same business process. Users will be required to search multiple locations to access a complete record of the business process.
- Most users will not review the older messages in their account and will not purge them on a periodic basis, unless account size or time limits are imposed. If messages are purged, it probably will not be done in compliance with an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule.

E-MAIL ARCHIVE

Government agencies may permit employees to retain e-mail messages using the archive feature of the e-mail system. Employees are responsible for selecting the messages that will be retained and for placing the messages in the archive. In some cases, this can be done using automated features of the software. Employees are encouraged to create topical folders within the archive to facilitate organization and retrieval of messages. Messages in the archive are stored in a physically separate location than those messages that are in the "live" system, however they are still accessed using the e-mail system software.

PROS

- Messages can be organized in folders within the e-mail account. Drag and drop filing is quick and easy.
- It is easy to search for, forward and reply to messages.
- Messages remain linked to their attachment(s) and transactional metadata.
- If the e-mail archive is stored on a network drive it will be backed up.

CONS

- If the e-mail archive is stored on the hard drive it will not be backed up.
- It's too easy--most users will save most everything automatically, without considering whether it is an official record and whether it should be saved.
- As the archive grows, regardless of where it is physically stored, it will cause space and performance problems.
- Messages will only be accessible by the account owner. [Technically messages will be stored on a drive that is accessible by others, but if the user is not logged into the e-mail system the file names will be meaningless, and the files open as meaningless characters.]

- Messages will not be stored with other paper and electronic records that document the same business process. Users will be required to search multiple locations to access a complete record of the business process.
- If a FOIA request or a discovery order is received, the person handling the response will have to expend additional resources to access messages in the archive, if they even know that relevant messages exist there.
- Most users will not review the messages in their archive and will not purge them on a periodic basis. If they are purged, it probably will not be done in compliance with an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule.

SAVE AS...

Government agencies may instruct employees to retain e-mail messages outside of the e-mail system. Employees that want to retain the messages in an electronic format must save them in another location. Employees are responsible for selecting the messages that will be saved (by going to the File menu and selecting Save As...). Messages are then converted into text files for future use. Employees are encouraged to retain the messages in topical folders with other electronic records that document the same business process.

PROS

- Since nothing happens automatically, users have to think and decide whether the message (and attachments) is an official record that should be retained. This will reduce the volume of messages that are stored as electronic documents.
- Users select which directory the message is stored in, and will be able to store the message and/or attachment(s) alongside other electronic files that document the business process. Users can also give the message a meaningful file name that facilitates retrieval.
- If the user selects to store the message and/or attachment(s) on a network drive, they will be backed up.
- If the user selects to store the message and/or attachment(s) on a shared drive, multiple staff in the agency will be able to access it. The staff could also reduce duplicate storage of messages and attachments, if individuals are assigned responsibility for filing documents on behalf of the group.
- It is easier for FOIA and litigation coordinators to find records when everything related to the business process is stored together.

CONS

- The physical link between the message and its attachment(s) will be broken. However, they can remain linked intellectually through naming conventions.
- Users cannot reply to or forward the message automatically using the e-mail system, but they can copy the old message into a new one.

- Most users do not review the electronic records stored in their directories and purge them on a periodic basis. If they are purged, it usually is not done in compliance with an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule.

PAPER PRINTOUT

Government agencies may instruct employees to retain e-mail messages outside of the e-mail system. Employees may decide to print their e-mail and retain the messages in topical folders with other paper records that document the same business process. Employees are responsible for printing the messages that will be retained.

PROS

- Since nothing happens automatically, users have to think and decide whether the message (and attachments) is an official record that should be retained. This will reduce the volume of messages that are stored as paper.
- Users select which file the message is stored in, and will be able to store the message and/or attachment(s) alongside other records that document the business process.
- Multiple staff in the agency will be able to access the records from the paper filing system.
- It is easier for FOIA and litigation coordinators to find records when everything related to the business process is stored together.
- Many employees are familiar with the procedures for storing paper records, and for destroying paper records in accordance with an approved Retention and Disposal Schedule.

CONS

- The physical link between the message and its attachment(s) will be broken if the attachment(s) are not stapled to the message.
- Users cannot reply to or forward the message electronically without converting it back to an electronic format.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT APPLICATION (RMA)

Government agencies may install Records Management Application (RMA) software to support the retention and access of electronic records (such as e-mail, word processed documents, digital images, electronic spreadsheets, etc.). RMAs mediate access to a centralized repository that stores the electronic records. The RMA software assigns retention periods to all electronic records based upon legally mandated retention requirements so they can be automatically destroyed at the appropriate time.

PROS

- Users have to think and decide whether the message (and attachments) is an official record that should be retained in the RMA repository. This will reduce the volume of messages that are retained.

- Users select which file the message is stored in, and will be able to organize and store the message and/or attachment(s) alongside other electronic records that document the business process.
- The physical link between the message and its attachment(s) will be maintained.
- Multiple staff in the agency will be able to access the electronic records from the repository. The staff could also reduce duplicate storage of electronic records, if individuals are assigned responsibility for filing documents on behalf of the group.
- Users, including FOIA and litigation coordinators, can conduct robust full-text searches of the repository to find electronic records.
- Users can retrieve electronic records from the repository for viewing, copying or editing. Edits can be saved into the repository as new versions using automated version control features.
- RMA software will automatically identify all electronic records in the repository that have fulfilled their legally mandated retention period and will destroy them in a manner that ensures they cannot be re-constructed.
- Electronic records stored in the repository are backed up on a regular basis. The backup is for disaster recovery purposes, and should not be used for search and retrieval.

CONS

- Users cannot reply to or forward messages automatically using the e-mail system, but they can copy the old message into a new one.
- Users have to learn how to use the repository to store and retrieve records.
- Users need incentives to change their habits.
- RMA software is expensive to purchase and implement.

For More Information

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<http://www.michigan.gov/recordsmanagement/>